

⇨ Competitor Site Assessments

Why and when

When developing a site it's very easy to become 'internally' focused. Pulling back and looking at the competition can yield valuable data that can help inform the development of your site. Competitor site assessments enable you to:

- Identify the strategic positioning of your competitors' products and services
- See how to differentiate your web based offer from the competition
- Benchmark your site's performance against the competition
- Find good and bad ideas!

The ultimate aim is to make your site the 'site of choice' - designing in isolation with no or little knowledge of the competitors will severely limit the opportunity to develop a competitive edge.

WUP can undertake competitor comparisons and analysis in order to assess how to achieve a competitive advantage.

Our approach

We adopt the same philosophy to understating competitor site assessments as we do when testing clients' own sites – combining rigorous user-focused usability research with a process to produce agreed and actionable results.

User Focused research

We adopt a user-led goal-oriented approach to usability testing that surfaces testers' behaviours and actions to help inform thinking about both strategic issues (how users want to interact with the site elements) and tactical issues (the usability issues that enable or inhibit user goals being achieved). We agree with the client the key issues we want to understand about competitor sites and then focus the testing to get insight the detail of the elements.

Action Oriented Process

A key element of our approach is to encourage all those in an organisation who can influence the implementation of the session's outcomes to attend at least some of the testing session and a discussion facilitated by WUP. This encourages collective learning and enables the development team to take ownership of the research results.

How we do site comparisons

Depending on the objectives of the research, the project typically has four elements:

- Project preparation
- Recruitment
- Unobserved user testing
- Observed user testing

NB the number of testers required in any site comparison research depends on a range of factors (e.g. what it is wished to achieve, the budget and time available, the number of sites in the comparison, and the sites' target audiences).

Project preparation

We plan the research in consultation with the client so the client gets the 'right' solution - not an 'off the shelf' one. Prior to the research, we agree with the client's project manager the key aims of the testing, the tester profiles, testing locations, timescales, etc. We prepare a facilitation guide for the testing sessions for approval by the client's project manager in advance of the testing sessions.

Recruitment

We undertake our own recruitment - we do not use third parties. We believe this allows us to recruit more accurately to our client's specification, provide greater flexibility, and treat testers in a decent and ethical way. We are experienced at recruiting testers from a

wide range of backgrounds and occupations, and with a range of experience, including testers with visual, motor or cognitive impairment.

All potential testers undergo a detailed screening to ensure they match the tester profile(s) - a profile of the testers is sent to the client project manager prior to the testing session for approval. Testers are paid a fee for their participation in the usability testing: this ensures their participation and demonstrates appreciation of the value of their involvement.

Unobserved User Testing

Unobserved user testing is conducted as follows:

- Unobserved testing is conducted either at our facilities or using a mobile usability laboratory in suitable testing locations (Mobile usability laboratory consists of: Laptop running Techsmith Morae, with webcam and microphone, to record screen, tester's face, audio)
- The testing sessions are facilitated by a WUP consultant
- Following the unobserved testing, an interim report is produced that summarises the research outputs to inform the people attending the observed user testing

Observed User Testing

Observed user testing is conducted as follows:

- The observed testing day is split into two halves, with user testing (3 testers) in the morning and a facilitated discussion session in the afternoon
- The observed testing session is conducted either in our observation studios or other suitable facilities and observed by up to 8 client stakeholders (ideally all those involved in implementing the research outputs should attend the observed testing including third party site developers if used)
- The testing sessions are facilitated by a WUP consultant

- The observers are active participants, capturing issues as they arise. A second WUP consultant facilitates this process.
- A discussion session is held after the research to discuss the outcomes and identify the learning points for future site development. This session enables the development team to take ownership of the research results, and develop a collective view of issues. This approach means that the team will, within a single day, develop a shared view and have a detailed knowledge, and ownership, of the issues raised
- The sessions are recorded onto a DVD capturing the test screen outputs, a video of the tester, and audio outputs for analysis purposes and subsequent viewing by the client

Outputs

WUP undertakes a qualitative analysis of the data; the data sources comprise the 'real time' issues captured by observers during the testing sessions and the DVD recordings, which are analyzed following the user research.

The outputs of the research are:

- Interim report of the outcomes of the unobserved testing
- A final report covering:
 - Background and objectives for the specific site comparison research
 - Key findings from the research
 - Verbatim tester comments to support the issues identified
 - Summary of facilitated discussion outcomes
 - A list of recommendations as agreed at the facilitated discussion that would detail timescales and responsibilities (if agreed)
- DVDs of the testing sessions showing the screen being viewed, tester head shot and the audio of the session

Client examples

Examples of projects include:

Client	Project	Date
Screwfix	Comparison of shopping basket approaches	August 2006
Ebookers	Comparison of holiday booking approaches	March 2004

Fees

Most of our work is tailored to individual client's requirements and we quote an inclusive price for each piece of work. However, approximate costs are largely determined by the number of users tested, so approximate costs can be worked out by combing the cost of an observed session if required (i.e. 3 testers followed by a facilitated debrief) typically £5,450, if conducted at our facilities, plus the cost of any additional unobserved testers at £450 per tester. Therefore a 6 user study would cost £6,800. (NB this is a fully inclusive price covers all WUP's fees, tester recruitment and payment, observation studios, equipment hire, reports, DVDs and travel expenses etc.)